“Playing for Change, Singing for Peace”?: Music, Dance, and Peace in the African Great Lakes Region

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by Jean-Benoît Falisse

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Jean-Benoît Falisse is a lecturer at the African Studies Centre of the Un

of Edinburgh. Seven years ago, as he was doing some of his PhD research in the city of Bukavu, Eastern DR Congo, he bumped into a distant relative. They sat for a beer. Jean-Benoît mentioned in passing the amateurish documentary film on music in post-conflict Burundi he had just finished shooting with friends. The distant relative explained an idea he and many others gravitating around the Foyer Culturel de Goma, an arts school, had been ruminating for a couple of years: organising a music festival in Goma, just across the lake. Jean-Benoît got involved, bringing artists and friends from Burundi to the first edition of the festival and working on different bits and pieces. He has kept working with Amani festival since and is one of its trustees. He is writing in his own name.

Most would call organising a three-day open-air music festival in Eastern DR Congo sheer madness, which is probably a very good reason for doing it. The region is infamous for its relentless human rights abuses, its countless displaced people, and its ruthless rebel groups. A few years ago, some poorly-inspired international journalist—or maybe was it an aid organisation seeking to raise more funds—even dubbed its largest city, Goma, the “rape capital of the world”. The conflict in Eastern DR Congo is complex and multi-layered, but one thing is clear: interpersonal and inter-ethnic trust is very low. There are tensions between the Congolese and the Rwandans, between the Hunde and the Hutu and the Nande, between the Hema and the Lendu, etc. Could more music, this other thing DR Congo is worldly famous for, reconcile people and soothe the bleeding heart of a troubled region?

Probably not. It may well be that “musick has Charms to sooth a savage Breast, to soften Rocks, or bend a knotted Oak” (Congreve 1697) but many in the Great Lakes region also painfully remember the killer songs of the Rwandan genocidaires (Li 2004) and dictator Mobutu Sese Seko’s instrumental use of rumba music (White 2008). Music rarely stops bullets, as we came to realise when we had to cancel the first edition of our festival in August 2012 because the M23 rebel group was besieging and bombarding Goma.

Anybody remotely acquainted with DR Congo knows the central importance of (Congolese) music in Congolese society. This includes the many economic and

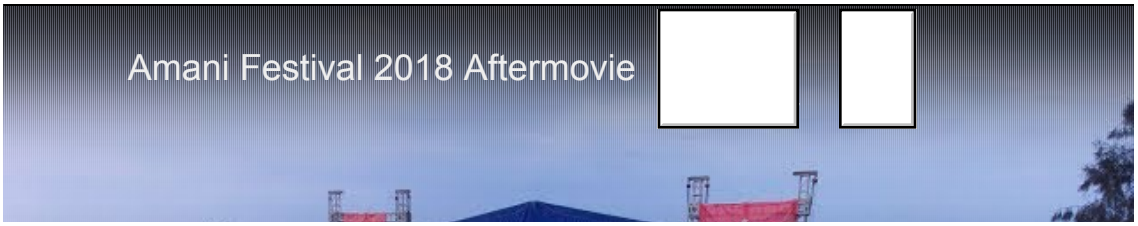
political actors who strategically use musicians to seize markets and votes. In the fierce battle for the Congolese beer market, superstars JB Mpiana and Werasson represent Bralima (Heineken), while another superstar, Koffi Olomide, has been contracted by Bralima’s main competitor, Bracongo (Groupe Castel). The political battleground sees equally decided attempts to rally musicians, this time behind politicians—but still using dollars. (In)famoulsy, Koffi Olomide dedicated a song to President Kabila in 2012 before later joining the ranks of the opposition. Abroad, *the Combattants,* an acephalous diaspora political movement (Pype 2017), oppose the regime by obstructing concerts by Congolese musicians. Even the Catholic Church is getting involved: on 10 November 2017, the archbishop of Kinshasa said a mass for the Congolese artists. The regime promptly denounced a black mass seeking to incite artists to insurrection. Add to the mix international NGOs promoting their activities through the voices of often handsomely paid local musicians (Ndaliko 2016), and you will have some sense of the heightened stakes around music in the DR Congo.

There is, however, some hope that music can be a positive game-changer in Eastern Congo. We have run our three-day music and dance festival for six consecutive years and the latest edition, in February 2019, gathered 34,000 festival-goers, 40 bands, and the international media.

When the first edition of the festival finally took place 14–16 February 2014, just a few months after the M23 rebels had disarmed, it was an instant hit. 25,000 festivalgoers came from across all parts of town and the entire region to rejoice together with Congolese artists Lokua Kanza, Lexxus Legal, and Innoss’B among others. In the months before the festival, many among the volunteers, artists, sponsors, and authorities had expressed doubts about the feasibility of the project: the whole thing was evidently driven by contagious enthusiasm rather than expertise or experience in organising a large-scale cultural event. However, most were also inclined to give it a chance; perhaps because, for everybody, there was not much to lose, and much to win. Eventually, everyone would be able to pride themselves of having contributed to something different in the Kivus through one of the largest music festivals seen in the region in

recent memory. The organising team had slightly changed after the near-miss initial festival attempt of 2012, but it still revolved around Guillaume Bisimwa, the head of the *Foyer Culturel de Goma* and Belgian entrepreneur Eric de Lamotte. Their local network and business acumen would prove instrumental in transforming what was a nice—but some said “lucky”—one-off success into a yearly event that has contributed to changing the way Goma is perceived, and what it is associated with, in the region and in the world. The following six editions of the festival proved even more successful than the first one in terms of attendance, and they attracted world-famous African artists such as Tiken Jah Fakoli from Côte d’Ivoire, Habib Koité from Mali, Nneka from Ghana, Ismael Lo from Senegal, Sauti Saul from Kenya, or many of the DR Congo stars including Fally Ipupa, Werrason, Jupiter & Okwess, and Baloji. The organisers, including the hundreds of local volunteers, have developed real expertise in a series of festival-related activities ranging from catering to video editing, crowd management, and stage management. The emergence of Amani festival has been one of building up skills, organisational capacity, and networks after a slightly crazy idea became an immediate success.

Over the years, the event has become one of the largest music festivals in the region, and we now even have tourists crossing the dreaded Congolese border to join the fun. The festival is named Amani, the Swahili word for peace, and it seems that it does, indeed, create some peace; the city celebrates and some even forget the harshness of daily life during the festival. The unimaginable happens: a mainly Congolese crowd cheers Rwandan artists and all, from sometimes antagonistic ethnic and political groups, dance and re-joy. How did we get there and how did we navigate the political economy of Congolese music? There is probably no recipe, but two elements are certainly worth emphasising.



Video 1. Amani Festival 2018, “after movie.”

Amani Festival is, first and foremost, resting on a strong contingent of over 700 hundred volunteers. They are overwhelmingly young Congolese aged between 18 and 25 and the core group is engaged in different activities at the *Foyer Culturel*, a local youth centre promoting music activities throughout the year. The festival belongs to them and they are determined to make something of it that doesn’t resemble the factionalised and violent environment in which they grew up. The festival did not *create* a strong base in the population, it is very much made of, by, and for its prime audience. Of course, not everybody is involved at the same level, but the volunteers of the *Foyer Culturel* maintain a strong engagement with their neighbours, friends, and families through a round-the-year song contest (whose winners sing at the festival) and mobile concerts in the different parts of town.

Doing something different cannot, however, mean organising the festival in isolation of the different key players in Eastern DR Congo. This simply would not be possible. The size of the event requires collaboration with the Congolese police and administration. The United Nations peacekeeping mission (MONUSCO) is the only one that has the massive mobile generators needed to power the main stage. The NGOs and the private sector have the money necessary to keep the ticket at US$ 1 and making it accessible to all. The local civil society is a key mobiliser in the population and, as the NGOs and the private sector, they can apply for a stand where to promote their activities,

around the entrance of the festival. Even the mighty Catholic Church is involved in the festival as the owner of the college that serves as the venue of the festival. The strength, survival, and success of the festival rest on working with those different partners while maintaining a project that genuinely belongs to the volunteers and organising team of the festival.

Pinpointing the precise effects of the festival on peace and stability in Goma is an arduous endeavor we just started. What is, however, clear to us is that the core achievement of the festival has been to act as an incubator for doing things differently: up and coming artists have used Amani’s stage to forge a path of their own, young entrepreneurs have used the event as a stall to reach new audiences, and volunteers have been inspired to develop their own initiatives. One striking example of such initiatives is Goma Dance Festival, a yearly hip hop festival created by Amani Festival volunteers.

Video 2. Goma Dance Festival 2018, “after movie.”

Music has been a powerful instrument for creating a new space in a context marked by mistrust, multifaceted conflicts, and failed attempts to build peace. I don’t know what will flourish next in the space created by the festival, but this is

precisely its point: unleashing unexpected new and positive energies, for the road to peace is not worked out in advance.

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